



# Western States Water

## Addressing Water Needs and Strategies for a Sustainable Future

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### **WESTERN GOVERNORS**

#### **2024 Annual Meeting - Olympic Valley, California**

On June 10-12, the Western Governors' Association (WGA) celebrated its 40-year anniversary at its annual meetings in Olympic Valley, California near Lake Tahoe. Wyoming Governor Mark Gordon, WGA Chair, led the meetings joined by Idaho Governor Brad Little, Nevada Governor Joe Lombardo, New Mexico Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham, and North Dakota Governor Doug Burgum. WGA adopted five policy resolutions regarding water quality, water resource management, cleaning up abandoned hardrock mines, transportation infrastructure, and disaster preparedness and response. Governor Gordon also announced the release of a report on his initiative on Decarbonizing the West.

Resolution 2014-09, Water Quality in the West, states that clean water is essential to strong economies, healthy ecosystems, and quality of life in the West. It emphasizes states' role as co-regulators in the implementation of the Clean Water Act and the Safe Drinking Water Act. It also conveys Western Governors' shared perspective on the role of federal assistance in meeting federal water quality standards, including technical assistance and funding for the Environmental Protection Agency's Clean Water and Drinking Water State Revolving Funds.

Resolution 2014-07, Water Resources Management in the West, highlights states' sovereign authority over the allocation of water within their boundaries and emphasizes the importance of federal infrastructure investments in delivering clean and reliable water to communities. Western Governors support federal programs and the role they play in managing water resources including programs under the Bureau of Reclamation, Army Corps of Engineers, Department of Agriculture (USDA), U.S. Geological Survey, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. The resolution also addresses emerging cybersecurity threats.

The first keynote speaker was USDA Deputy Secretary Xochitl Torres Small who signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with Western

Governors, marking "a new beginning for better integration when it comes to how forest and rangeland restoration projects are prioritized across different land ownerships. It creates new opportunities for us to work more closely with you on important issues, such as expanding rural high-speed Internet and enhancing our support for farming and ranching communities." She also announced USDA's investment of \$12M for 22 Good Neighbor Authority projects across 13 states including Arizona, California, Idaho, Montana, Oregon, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming, and another \$54.6M for 41 Joint Chiefs Landscape Scale Restoration Partner projects. She addressed forest, water and watershed health, as well as wildfire and wildlife, noting these issues don't respect political boundaries. Torres Small reached out to and met with WSWC staff to discuss our interests.

The Governors further explored the topic of disaster preparedness and response during a panel discussion with experts from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the U.S. Small Business Administration, the Nevada Division of Emergency Management, and McKinsey & Company. They focused on strategies for improving state-federal coordination to more effectively mitigate or recover from disasters by simplifying assistance programs and leveraging new technologies. Data, analytics and artificial intelligence are increasingly important to assess risk, including long-term community flooding and urban wildfire, as well as to position and leverage public and private planning, mitigation and recovery resources.

A panel discussion focused on water management highlighting the critical role of intergovernmental cooperation and technology. Acting Deputy Secretary of the Interior Laura Daniel Davis declared, "Over the last two years, our amazing teams, your amazing teams, worked together to stabilize the [Colorado River] system.... Underpinning the progress that we were able to make were the hundreds of projects that are designed to conserve water resources, update water infrastructure, needed updates to get us into the 21st century." She emphasized the "once in a generation" investments to ensure abundant water for a secure and sustainable future.

Tanya Trujillo, New Mexico Deputy State Engineer, Senior Water Advisor to Governor Lujan Grisham and a WSWC member, proclaimed, "We all care deeply about the issues related to water." She affirmed the State's commitment to implementing a 50-year Water Plan emphasizing water conservation, new supplies, and water and watershed protection. Water reuse is a critical component, covering both wastewater, energy-related produced waters, and saline groundwater. Trujillo specifically mentioned a joint effort with the WSWC to prioritize infrastructure investments in New Mexico and work with federal partners to leverage both public and private financial resources.

Patricia Sinicropi, Executive Director, WateReuse Association, asserted, "We have the technology to treat any water for any purpose – drinking, irrigation manufacturing." The water reuse industry is focused on sustainability and working in support of tax credits for public-private partnerships to encourage reuse. Treating stormwater and wastewater is not cheap. She said, "Water is becoming the essential fuel for our economy." She mentioned OneWater Nevada, a collaborative regional effort exploring a comprehensive approach to extending the resiliency and sustainability of local water resources and Idaho's investment in water reuse. Los Angeles county in California is striving to reclaim and recycle all water.

#### **WGA 40th Anniversary**

WGA Executive Director Jack Waldorf welcomed the governors, former governors and attendees. Former Governors David Ige of Hawaii, Butch Otter of Idaho, Steve Bullock of Montana, Bob Miller and Brian Sandoval both of Nevada, Gary Herbert of Utah, and Matt Mead of Wyoming joined a panel to reflect on their time with WGA. They participated in live-stream discussions moderated by Judy Woodruff, the former anchor and managing editor of the PBS NewsHour, focused on the importance of bipartisanship when dealing with many of the country's increasingly complex problems.

Sandoval said they learned from the other governors as they got to know each other. Mead noted western governors share common natural resources issues related to endangered species, energy, water and wildlife. Otter declared, "Water to land is like blood to the body." Coming from a family of 11, he said, "You had to get along." He left Congress because it was so hard to accomplish anything.

Ige observed Hawaii is unique as there is no majority, but rather many minority groups, requiring working together with respect for colleagues. There is more we agree on than our differences. "We can't accept gridlock." Bullock said, "Governors have to get things

done." He noted that land-based, resources-based issues brought them together and forged trust. He said democracy is still being tested, and he wished people cared more about working together than expressing hatred for the other team.

Herbert added, "I am hopeful for the future." But we can't look to Washington, D.C., to solve our issues, "They are out of touch." He asked the audience to carefully consider why we don't have better choices to lead our nation.

Miller served as governor from 1989-1999. He said back then, "It wasn't so confrontational and personal," with no social media and immediate attacks. Addressing WGA's Leadership Institute's young delegates he declared, "You young ladies and gentlemen are the hope for the future."

Otter suggested Washington, D.C., doesn't have the political will to solve our problems. Most of D.C. is more interested in perpetuating their own positions than the national good. Mead observed, "Often it is D.C. against the West, no matter the Administration." He said that it is more effective when western governors, Republicans and Democrats together, go to D.C. and sit down with cabinet members. Bullock pointed out that WGA policy resolutions provide a basis for addressing core western concerns. "Even if we disagree, how do we get things done?" We have to find what we can agree on to move forward. Ige suggested federal agencies want to make things work as well, and are looking for solutions.

Herbert asserted that States are at the center of policy experiments, while D.C. "kicks the can down the road." Gordon noted the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and Clean Air Act (CAA) were laws Republicans sponsored, but NEPA and other federal permitting rules and regulations now stifle development. He noted western states took the lead in protecting sage grouse rather leave it up to the federal government and the Endangered Species Act. There are other issues where States can lead.

A panel of past WGA Executive Directors followed, including James Maddy (1984-1985), Jim Souby (1990-2004), Pam Inmann (2004-2012), and James Ogsbury (2012-2023). Maddy noted in his remarks the governors' early involvement in regional water management challenges, and specifically called out the Western States Water Council. The creation of the WSWC through adoption of a resolution by the Western Governors Conference in 1965 was recognized as a signature accomplishment. Separately, Andrea Travnicek, a WSWC member, participated on a panel of former WGA Staff Advisory Council members.

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**The WESTERN STATES WATER COUNCIL is a government entity of representatives appointed by the Governors of Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Kansas, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Oregon, South Dakota, Texas, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming.**